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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to assess the relative importance of various factors influencing children's sex role orientations. A measure of sex role flexibility developed for this study and a self concept questionnaire were administered to 376 children in kindergarten and third grade. The children's parents were interviewed about sex role attitudes and socialization practices and were asked to fill out the Spence Attitudes Towards Women Scale and the Bem Sex Role Inventory for both themselves and their children. Results suggest that children begin elementary school with fairly stereotyped sex role orientations which become more traditional by the time children reach middle elementary school. Girls tend to be more flexible than boys in areas like occupational choices, but are less flexible in terms of personality traits and in their views about who should perform traditionally feminine-stereotyped activities. Older children perceived their parents as less traditional and exhibited more flexibility with regard to occupational choices. In most other respects, however, older children gave more traditional responses. Peer and media influences appear to be stronger correlates of sex role flexibility in children than perceived parental influences. Parents appeared to be less traditional than their children in overall orientations, with few differences obtained between mothers and fathers. Mothers tended to be somewhat more flexible in most areas, although fathers expressed more liberality in regard to mothers working. Parents of daughters were more flexible than parents of sons. There was a significant correlation between scores of parents and children. (JMB)

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Determinants of
Sex-Role Flexibility in Children*

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Determinants of Sex-Role Flexibility in Children

The data I'm going to be discussing today were collected as part of a project concerned with the flexibility of sex-role orientations in a group of young elementary school children. It has often been stated that sex-role norms in the U.S. have changed radically over the past decade, and there is certainly considerable evidence to suggest that this may be true for the adult population, particularly in the employment area. It is not clear, however, how much of an impact these changes have had on child-rearing practices, and whether or not children are behaving differently as a consequence.

Has this new societal awareness had any impact upon childhood sex role socialization, and if so, in what areas?

There are many variables which affect the acquisition of sex roles in children. Global theories in this area have focused on the importance that parental role models play in this process. The present investigator, however, is of the belief that (at least with older children) there are many other sources which may be equally significant. Systematic information about sex roles is continually made available to children by their peers, the schools, and the media. If this is the case, then its relevance to sex role innovation is clear. Even if parents wish to change the status quo, they may not be very effective given the barrage of sex-role stereotypes children are continually exposed to.

The purposes of the present study, therefore, were twofold. First, we attempted to develop a measure of sex-role flexibility in children that assessed a wide variety of areas to see how much variability there was. Secondly, we tried to assess the relative importance of various sources of

influence in the development of these orientations. Wherever possible, we also interviewed the parents of these children to assess their views. Two different age groups of children (6 and 9 year olds) were used to test the possibility that the patterns of influence might differ according to developmental level.

Method

We tested 376 children attending public elementary schools in Boulder and Denver, Colorado. Of this group, 156 were at the kindergarten level, and 220 were third-graders. There were 181 girls and 195 boys. They were drawn from seven different schools which were fairly heterogeneous with respect to socioeconomic level. The majority of the sample, however, came from middle class homes, and were predominantly Caucasian. In addition to the child sample, we also conducted interviews about sex-role attitudes and socialization practices with 220 mothers and 138 fathers of these children. Thus, we were able to get 59% of the mothers, and 37% of the fathers. Parents were also asked to fill out the Spence Attitudes Towards Women Scale, and the Bem Sex Role Inventory for both themselves and their children. Results pertinent to the child and parent sample will be discussed separately.

Child Interview

The test for the children contained fourteen sections. It was individually administered. The components are listed on the handout in Table 1. These included the following: (1) peer influence (this included questions about what they would do if friends wanted to engage in cross-sexed activity; what friends would do if they wanted to; and number of opposite-sex best friends mentioned); (2) favorite television shows and stars (these were rated for

traditionality); (3) tolerance for other children engaged in cross-sexed activities (shown on film—Karate and chemistry for girls, needlepoint and ballet for boys); (4) role models, which included questions about who did various common chores around and outside the house; (5) favorite movies; (6) personality traits (hypothetical situations involving dependency and aggression; (7) tolerance for adults engaged in cross-sexed activities; (8) choice of future occupations (e.g., between stereotyped and non-stereotyped); (9) book choices; (10) future domestic aspirations (e.g., who will take care of your children; will you be working; who will cook); (11) parental influence, e.g., whether parents would purchase a cross-sex typed toy, would permit their engaging in a cross-sexed activity, birthday and Christmas gifts purchased (which were rated for traditionality), chores assigned to them, and perceptions of future occupations their parents desired for them; (12) toy and activity preferences (these were rated for traditionality); (13) comic book preferences; and (14) a gender bias scale consisting of slides depicting males and females competing for awards or engaging in negative behaviors. A self-concept questionnaire was also administered.

Child Results

All items were designed so that they could be scored on a continuum from zero (most traditional) to four (most flexible). A score of two indicated neutrality. Responses to open-ended questions such as media and book choices were rated by a sample of both adults and junior high school students, and average rankings were used. Thus, scores on all items could be added to obtain a total sex-role flexibility score. The possible range of scores was from zero to 240. The average score actually obtained was 77, with a standard deviation of 17. The actual range was from 35 to 123. Thus, it would appear

that although variation exists on this scale, this group of children clearly fall on the traditional side of the continuum.

An analysis of variance of the total scores revealed several significant effects. Girls obtained higher flexibility scores than boys (means of 85 vs. 70). Third-graders exhibited less flexible orientations than kindergarten children (74 vs. 82). Children from more affluent districts had higher flexibility scores than those who were less affluent. Finally, a sex by grade interaction indicated that girls' scores decrease less with age than do boys' scores. Although the sex difference was expected, the direction of the age difference was somewhat surprising. If women's liberation issues were filtering down to children so that increased sex-role flexibility was becoming more socially desirable, we might expect that the older group, being more sophisticated, would reflect this. Instead, we find that the direction is an opposite one—middle elementary school children are more traditional than younger ones. This difference cannot be simply ascribed to developmental differences in the knowledge of stereotypes since questions were phrased as to reflect the child's actual behavior and choices.

Totals do not tell the whole story, however. Scores were broken down in several ways. First we analyzed the individual components of the scale. Secondly, we conducted factor analyses and step-wise regression analyses to obtain a better idea of the structure, and to assess how much each component contributed to the variability.

The findings relevant to the individual portions of the scale are contained in Table 1 of the handout sheet. The second and third columns show the pattern of sex differences; the fourth and fifth show the age differences. Peer influence is more conservative for boys and/or older children. Children report very few opposite-sex friends, and these few diminish with age. Girls express

more tolerance towards other children engaged in cross-sexed activities than do boys. With regard to role models, no overall sex or age differences emerged, and children's perceptions of who does household chores are quite traditional. Further breakdown of chores into stereotypically masculine or feminine, however, revealed that each sex had more traditional perceptions of their "appropriate" chores, and more flexible views of the other. Children generally appear to be less stereotyped on the personality variables than on some of the others. Girls appear less flexible in this area than boys, who tend to express a greater range of choices in responses to aggression, help-seeking and emotional expressiveness. Tolerance towards adults engaged in cross-sexed activities is less than that expressed towards children. Breakdowns of these scores revealed that each sex is less tolerant towards its own, and reactions to adult males engaged in feminine activities elicited the most resistance. On occupational choices, girls are more flexible than boys, and choices generally become more flexible with age (i.e., tennis or librarian). Future projections of domestic life are fairly traditional for both age and sex groups, particularly with regard to same-sex items. The only exception to this pattern is that most of the girls do view themselves as working after they are married and have children. Parental influence is seen as fairly flexible, more so by the older children, and by females. Toys and activities chosen are somewhat less sex-typed than perceptions of role models. Older children are less traditional in toy choices than younger ones. Findings with regard to gender bias show that children become less biased with age. Girls appear to be more chauvinistic than boys, and tend to choose boys more for all the bad things.

Media choices yielded some interesting findings. Choices of TV shows (rated for sex roles and themes) tend to be quite traditional. The choices of third graders are considerably more traditional than younger children.

Boys tend to choose more traditional programs than do girls. Boys invariably choose males as their favorite personalities, whereas girls choose both males and females. Although book choices tend to be somewhat less traditional, a similar pattern emerges. Boys choose more traditional books, and tend to exclusively choose male characters as favorites (but not quite as strongly as for TV). With age, boys' book choices get more traditional. Unlike television, however, girls' choices become more flexible with age. Trends with regard to movies are essentially similar, with the one notable difference that girls choose females as their favorite movie person. Comic books appear to be the most traditional, and the same pattern of sex differences exists. Interestingly, few age differences were found with regard to choices in this area.

In summary, it appears that the patterns are fairly complex ones. With regard to sex differences, girls appear to be more flexible in perceptions of parental influence, in their work orientation and occupational choices, in their media choices, and in their tolerance towards others engaged in cross-sexed activities. They are also more likely to know something about women's liberation, although surprisingly few children in the sample had ever heard the term before. On the other hand, girls tend to be more traditional with regard to future domestic roles, chores around the house, and with regard to personality variables. They are also more chauvinistic at these developmental levels. Age trends reveal similar complexity. Older children exhibit greater flexibility than younger ones in the areas of occupational choices, toy and activity preferences, perceived parental influence, and they show less gender bias. On the other hand, most media choices appear to be more stereotyped for older than younger children, and their tolerance towards others engaged in cross-sexed activities diminishes.

Before concluding this discussion of the children's data, I'd like to make a few remarks concerning the regression analysis. This analysis was conducted to assess the relative contributions of each of the previously discussed components to the total flexibility scores. The order in which the areas are listed in Table 1 represents the order in which they emerged from the regression analysis. The most significant component to emerge was peer influence which accounted for 32% of the variance. The next most important was television choice. Peer and TV influence together account for 60% of the variance. Parent influence came out eleventh, and did not actually contribute significantly to the prediction of children's flexibility scores. Thus, at least in terms of children's perceptions, parents do not seem to have much of an impact on how traditional or flexible their sex-role orientation is.

Parent Interview

The parent interview was administered individually to mothers and fathers at either their homes or offices. In addition to biographical information, the following components were assessed: (1) attitudes towards mothers working outside the home; (2) work histories and career aspirations of mothers; (3) perceived effects of women's liberation on their lives; (4) toys and activities preferred for their children; (5) television choices for themselves; (6) amount of time they spend in child care activities; (7) media choices for their children (books and television); (8) how they would respond to hypothetical situations of boys and girls engaged in atypical activities; (9) how they would feel about their children choosing atypical activities and occupations, and (10) descriptions of their child at present, and projected 20 years in the future. These areas are listed in Table 2 of the handout sheet. In

addition, they completed Bem Sex Role Inventories for themselves, and their child, and the short form of the Spence Attitudes Towards Women scale.

Parent Results

On the basis of the biographical information, we can describe the sample as follows. The fathers are, on the average, 36 years old, the mothers are 35 (SD = 5). Eighty-five percent of the sample are currently married. Mothers were first married at 22, fathers at 24 (SD = 2 years). Average years of schooling completed by fathers and mothers were 16 and 15, respectively. Ninety-three percent of the mothers were not working at the time of their first child's birth, and 50% were not working at the present time (24% part-time, 26% full-time).

All items on the parent questionnaire were coded in a comparable way to the children's responses. Thus, the possible range for each item was from 0 (most traditional) to 4 (most innovative).

A total flexibility score was computed for each parent. Responses to the work history question were not included in the total score so that males' and females' scores would be more comparable. The total possible range was from zero to 208. The average score obtained was 102, with a standard deviation of 13. The actual range was from 62 to 143. Thus, we can see that the parent sample appears somewhat more flexible than the children's. The average appears to be fairly close to the neutral point. An analysis of variance of these total scores revealed only one significant effect: parents of daughters are more flexible than parents of sons.

A picture of the varying components that went into the total flexibility score can be gained by looking at Table 2 of the handout which compares the responses of mothers and fathers in the various areas, and parents of daughters with those of sons. As can be seen from this table, the differences between

mothers and fathers are generally not as pronounced as those between boys and girls (on Table 1). Interestingly, fathers have less traditional attitudes towards mothers working than do the mothers themselves. Mothers tend to report somewhat more positive effects of women's liberation, but they don't report a great deal of impact of this upon child-rearing practices. They select somewhat less traditional TV shows for themselves than do fathers. Although this latter difference is significant, it should be noted that parental TV choices all tend to be quite traditional, more so even than their children. Media choices made by mothers for their children tend to be less traditional than those made by fathers. Mothers also are more liberal on the Spence scale, and describe themselves as more androgynous on the Bem scale than do the fathers.

Daughters and sons are treated differentially in some areas, but not in all. Parental choices of books and TV shows for their children are less traditional for daughters, as are parental toy and activity preferences. Few differences exist, however, in terms of the kinds of adjectives used by parents to describe their sons and daughters, either in the present or as a twenty-year projection. There does, however, tend to be more lenience involved in daughters engaging in cross-sexed activities than sons. Most parents report greater happiness with their daughters becoming engineering professors than with their sons becoming professors of home economics.

I wish I could report today on the results of regression analyses, and of parent-child correlation patterns. Unfortunately, we do not yet have these analyses.

Conclusions

The results of this survey suggest that children begin elementary school with fairly stereotyped sex-role orientations on the average, which become more traditional by middle elementary school. Girls tend to be more flexible than boys in areas like occupational choices, but they are less flexible in terms of personality traits, and in their views about who should perform traditionally feminine-stereotyped activities. Patterns of sex-role flexibility differed somewhat for the younger and older age groups. Older children perceived their parents as less traditional and exhibited more flexibility with regard to occupational choices. In most other respects, however, older children gave more traditional responses. Peer and media influences appear to be stronger correlates of sex-role flexibility in children than perceived parental influences.

Parents interviewed in the present study appeared to be less traditional than their children in overall orientations. There were surprisingly few differences obtained between mothers and fathers. Mothers tended to be somewhat more flexible in most areas, although fathers expressed more liberality with regards to mothers working. Parents of daughters were more flexible than parents of sons, substantiating the oft-repeated assertion in the literature that sex-role socialization tends to be more stringent for boys. Interestingly, although the children's responses did not report parental influence as very significant, there were some important parallels. Girls did report that their parents were more flexible than boys did, and these perceptions would appear to be accurate. Furthermore, boys were more traditional than girls in their sex-role orientations, and this may be reflecting, at least in part, differential parental treatment. Finally, scores of parents and children did correlate significantly (child-mother = .36; child-father = .25).

In terms of the questions originally raised, the results of this initial survey suggest two things: The effects of women's liberation issues have not filtered down very strongly to contemporary grade school children. Where it does exist, the impact is more significant for females than for males.

Table 1
Children's Responses to Flexibility Scale

<u>Area</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Girls</u>	<u>Boys</u>	<u>Kindergarten</u>	<u>Third Grade</u>
Peer influence	1.71	1.92	1.50	1.82	1.60
Television choices	1.0	1.29	.71	1.27	.76
Cross sex tolerance - Children	2.3	2.70	1.95	2.36	2.21
Role models	.7	.66	.66	.61	.62
Movies	1.0	1.55	.48	1.02	.94
Personality	1.8	1.29	2.27	1.73	1.85
Cross sex tolerance - Adults	.81	.76	.85	.91	.76
Occupation choices	1.5	1.76	1.22	1.15	1.70
Books	1.3	1.57	.86	1.20	1.19
Future domestic choices	.96	1.12	.78	.99	1.11
Parental influence	1.6	1.71	1.68	1.49	1.72
Toys & activities	1.5	1.60	1.35	1.44	1.47
Comics	1.0	1.56	.41	1.01	.95
Gender bias	1.6	1.32	1.84	1.43	1.73

Table 2
Parents' Responses to Flexibility Scale

Area	Means	Mother	Father	Parent of Girl	Parent of Boy
Attitudes towards working mothers	1.8	1.72	1.95	1.80	1.82
Effects of women's liberation movement	2.0	2.09	1.95	1.99	2.08
Toys & activities	1.4	1.44	1.36	1.61	1.24
Parents' TV choices	.93	.98	.85		
Amount of child care	1.90	1.79	2.06	1.81	1.98
Media - Child's TV & book choices	1.43	1.50	1.29	1.51	1.33
Hypothetical sex-role socialization situations	2.29	2.33	2.22	2.28	2.26
Tolerance of cross-sex activities in children	2.6	2.61	2.58	2.64	2.64
Description of child	1.57	2.03	2.19	2.17	2.06
Attitudes toward women (Spence)	2.97	3.04	2.87	2.94	3.01
Bem Sex Role Inventory: Parent describing self (T ratio scores)	-.42	.63	-2.10	-.51	-.34
Bem Sex Role Inventory: Parent describing child (T ratio scores)	-.23	-.18	-.31	.47	-.84